

# Planning a One-Day Volunteering Event

## Step One: Build a Team

Planning and people are the two key ingredients to pulling off a successful volunteer project.

Get your project off to a good start by allowing plenty of time to plan. Depending on how large your project is, you may need anywhere from a few weeks to a year. For citywide projects, for example, large venues like convention centers, parks or community centers may be booked more than a year in advance. A realistic timeline calls for at least 11 weeks of advance planning.

Now you must gather a group of people to get the project off to a good start. The team should develop a consistent and organized method for incorporating the talents and ideas of a diverse group of participants. Remember, inclusive projects start in the planning phase, so begin thinking now of project partners that encompass diverse abilities, experiences, ages, and perspectives.

Note: the following section can be put in a tint box.

### Who's on the Team?

Your project team might include people who:

- can help with recruiting and publicity;
- are good at organizing and planning;
- are knowledgeable about community volunteers;
- are knowledgeable about volunteering systems;
- know the community and its needs;
- have previous experience;
- are currently involved as volunteers;
- have fundraising skills or contacts;
- have energy, enthusiasm and really

care about making a positive difference.

### Selecting Partners

One of the biggest mistakes made by project teams and organizers is selecting a project before seeking partners. Instead, invite potential partners to work with you before you start planning. Select the project together, so people feel included and develop equal ownership of the project. The more people you involve from the start, the more meaningful the partnership will become.

Effective partnerships can be made with

schools, colleges, businesses, government, neighborhoods, the faith community, young people, retirees, teachers and principals, police and fire departments, the media, sports teams, professional clubs, fraternities and sororities, scouting groups, and more. By partnering with others, group projects reach a larger population, involve more diverse groups of participants, and avoid duplication of efforts.

Seek out diversity; don't be afraid to contact groups that don't have high visibility in the community. Contact minority organizations and groups representing low-income people and people with disabilities. Simple, personal requests are the most effective way to recruit partners. You can also check with the Volunteer Center National Network, [www.VolunteerConnections.org](http://www.VolunteerConnections.org), to find a local volunteer center that can help you recruit, manage and train volunteers.

### **Get Off to a Good Start**

Once you have your project team, make sure they have tasks and respon-

sibilities right away. Stay in touch with team members and check in on their progress. Look for creative ways to thank them and let them know that you and the community are counting on them. The project team should get the momentum going, generate interest and set the tone for the entire project.

Here are some suggestions for helping your project team work effectively:

- Distribute work evenly. Make sure no one person is doing everything.
- You may need to have a subcommittee or task force work within the project team for such areas as recruitment, media outreach, project accessibility, and budget oversight.
- Set up a timeline for critical decisions to be made. If subcommittees are working on different aspects of project planning, pay attention to deadlines that affect multiple committees. For example, the publicity committee may need to know all donors by a certain day to print its brochures in time.

- Create a method of contact among team members outside the meeting environment. Provide all members with a list of phone numbers and e-mails.
- Sometimes, having a central theme for a meeting allows for more in-depth discussion on the topic. Allow committee members to prepare in advance for the discussion topic to enrich the outcome. Provide an agenda before the meeting. Meeting topics might include recruitment, budgeting, media and public relations, projects, barrier busting, preparation for the event, reflection, and dialogue.

After the event, continue to use your project team to get feedback from volunteers and partners and to build ongoing volunteer activities. If you work to build and foster a strong team, the people you bring together for a project will ignite connections that will continue long after the event is over.

## Step 2: Select a Meaningful Project

Good service projects match real community needs with the interests and skills of volunteers.

With research and thought, you can locate needed projects that could not be done without the added energy and dedication of volunteers.

Every community is unique and is confronted with its own pressing social needs. Some groups find it useful to focus on a few community issues and locate agencies and sites with which they can address these issues. Other planning teams can focus on many issues.

If you choose to work on a variety of issues, you may want to work with several agencies or organizations in the area. If you prefer to focus on particular issues, try a more targeted approach, working with organizations and groups that deal with issues of concern to your team.

Choose projects and sites where the volunteers can see and experience the impact of their work, such as cleanup, construction and rehabilitation projects.

### **Service Requirements**

Volunteers often enjoy working “people to people.” This can be anything from helping with a carnival for children or working with the residents of a senior home. The service should fulfill three key requirements:

- It should be of significant benefit to the community.
- It should be deemed important by members of the community and the organization.
- It should be a learning experience for the volunteers.

Other organizations and agencies may already have identified service projects into which your group could fit. Coordinating your team’s effort with Volunteer Centers or other local agencies leverages volunteer resources and

ensures their efforts are spent on relevant projects.

### **What to Look for in a Partner**

Two types of partnerships occur in developing a group project. The first is building the project planning team. The second is reaching out to an agency or organization that will host your group project.

To find a host partner for your project, first identify agencies that best meet the needs of your project. It may be a non-profit organization, a church group, a government agency or a neighborhood association. Keep an open mind and look for readiness and accountability in these organizations.

### **What do you look for in a partner organization?**

**Strong community ties.** The group maintains a continued positive presence to the community.

**Flexibility.** The organization has patience and realizes that planning a successful group project takes time.

**Experience.** A desirable partner

organization has experience with volunteers and developing partnerships.

**Staff preparedness.** The staff has experience with group projects and is willing to help with orientation and other needed support.

Once you've selected a few organizations to target, find the appropriate contact person. Call the agency and ask for the person who coordinates planning and participating in volunteer events. This will usually be a volunteer coordinator, a community relations coordinator, an executive director, a pastor, etc. Set up a meeting to discuss their needs and the vision your team has for a project. You may need to interview several agencies to get a good fit. If the agency is difficult to contact or does not return calls, consider choosing another one.

### **Have Realistic Expectations**

Work with agencies that have realistic expectations about what can be accomplished in the time allotted and have experience working with volunteers. Look for groups who want to build

long-term relationships with your team.

### **How do you build connections with host agencies or organizations?**

- Learn and understand their mission.
- Get to know the leadership, both paid and volunteer.
- Work together to create a project where both partners have clearly defined, designated roles.
- Identify synergies for shared outcomes.
- Be considerate of the agency staff's time and every day issues – they can't drop everything to plan.
- Have a shared vision – neither the project team nor the organization imposes its views, ideals and expectations on the outcomes.
- Build open communication with the agency. The more communication between agency and project team, the more likely things will run smoothly.

### **Tips for Choosing a Project**

1. Be flexible. Choose a project that can easily be scaled up or down, depending on the number of volunteers you attract.
2. Have a contingency plan for a low volunteer turnout, and one for excess volunteers.
3. Set realistic goals.
4. Plan to accomplish something tangible. Volunteers like to see results.
5. Quality counts more than quantity. A good, small service project that gets things done and is a joy to its volunteers is more powerful than a poorly run, large-scale project.

## **Step Three: Recruit Volunteers**

Citizen participation is the lifeblood of communities. Volunteers help people change their lives and transform communities. Group projects give people an opportunity to demonstrate caring and sharing and encourage more people to give their time and skills to an issue they care about.

One of the most important jobs in organizing a group project is recruiting volunteers. It is a process that must begin with enthusiasm.

Almost nine of 10 people say “Yes” when someone asks them to donate their time. Those who are asked are four times more likely to help as those who are not asked. Why do people volunteer? A recent study by Washington, D.C.-based Independent Sector found there are three top reasons:

- They feel compassion for people in need.
- They feel needed.
- Volunteering gives them a new

perspective on their community.

Keep those reasons in mind as you create your recruiting program. How can you frame the group project in a way that lets volunteers know they will be helping those in need, doing something important and finding out important things about their community?

Decide who you want to involve. You may want to create a project that has specific size constraints or pulls volunteers from a specific group of people. Knowing how big you want the event to be will help you decide what kind of steps you must take to recruit. Hint: Always count on at least 20% of volunteers not to show. Recruit more than you need.

To recruit volunteers, use the networks of your partnering organizations. Part of the partnership agreement should be access to partner mailing lists, e-mail lists, announcements made in staff meetings, office intranet or organizational newsletters. Many volunteers can be reached simply by using the

resources represented by your group team members.

### **How to Spread the Word**

Gather a core group of project team leaders together and let one of their first jobs be to recruit other volunteers.

If you need lots of volunteers, reach out to the general public. Post fliers and make announcements in local media advertising the project. Potential volunteers are everywhere, they just need to know about the project and be asked to participate.

Think strategically about where people go for information, and place information where people would notice announcements, such as grocery stores; movie theaters; family restaurants; day-care centers; hospitals; libraries; amusement parks; community bulletin boards; schools/universities; and neighborhood shops and businesses.

- Create energy around the project by getting your project team or public relations subcommittee members in front of the community:
- Set up tables in cafeterias, shopping malls and other well-traveled spots. Make sign-up sheets available. Be sure to check with the store's community outreach representative to find out where to place tables.
- Arrange a display—with sign-up information—at schools, banks, businesses, the airport and City Hall.
- Place announcements in local newspapers and neighborhood weeklies.
- Contact local radio and TV stations for spots in volunteer sections or community listings.
- Place announcements in church and synagogue bulletins and other groups that have regular mailings.
- Send a press release to local college and public radio stations.
- Recruit through the Internet.

- Ask public officials to spread the word through meetings and mailings to constituents.
- Get a proclamation from the mayor designating your project as a day of service.
- Arrange to speak at local community group meetings; bring sign-up sheets.
- Ask business to put fliers in their monthly mailing of bills to customers.

### Get Key Information from Recruits

At any event where volunteers sign up, it's critical to collect information from them for future contacts. Get the name, address, phone and fax numbers, e-mail address and a list of their skills and interests. It's critical to follow up with potential volunteers as soon as possible. Use quick and inexpensive ways to stay in touch: e-mail, faxes, phone trees or volunteers who make calls to those without e-mail.

Think inclusively when seeking out a volunteer pool. Your project should

reflect your community – young and old, the employed, the unemployed and the retired, professionals, minorities, singles and families, people of faith, people with disabilities, veterans, civic association members and community officials.

You can find these people at local business, community providers and advocacy groups, churches, synagogues, and mosques, schools and universities, professional groups, senior citizen and retiree organizations, civic and fraternal groups, neighborhood associations, groups that serve the disabled community, and chapters of national service groups.

But the not-so-secret weapon in recruiting volunteers is: Just ask.

### Working With Diverse Volunteer Audiences

As you work to create a group project team or to draw in volunteers to work on your project, keep in mind the diversity of audiences who may respond to your message.

## Tips for Seeking Out Diversity

Don't be afraid to contact groups that do not have high visibility in your community.

Contact minority-led organizations and groups representing low-income people and neighborhoods and people with disabilities.

Your partnerships can reflect all segments of your community.

We've collected information about some of these audiences in a special section of the *Creating a Group Project* book called Volunteer Audiences. The book contains information on families, young people, businesses, and people with disabilities as volunteers. It is recommended you check out these sections of the book as you plan your recruiting strategy.

## Step Four: Anticipate Troubleshooting

You can plan for most any occurrence, but your group project is not official

until there's a problem or challenge to overcome. Here's some advice for dealing with a few possible pitfalls.

### A Low Turnout of Volunteers

Make contingency plans. Decide what you'll do if you have fewer people than expected. Determine ahead of time which parts of the project or which sites will be cut if necessary. Even when everyone pre-registers, assume you will have 70% to 80% turnout.

### Bad Weather

You can't control the weather, so make sure all information clearly states event contingency plans. Make sure all presenters, organizers and team leaders know a decision about using the rain site well in advance. Buy extra boxes of large trash bags to be used as rainwear, ground cover, etc. If outdoor activities have been scheduled that cannot be completed in severe weather, have a secondary plan and rain date for volunteers. A communication plan should be developed so that all volunteers can be contacted in the event of a cancellation or move to a secondary site.

## Can't Complete Projects

Be realistic about what can be finished in the allotted time. Make sure necessary equipment is available at the site or arrange for it to be delivered early. Be on time and on task. Make sure the volunteer teams know what needs to be done by day's end. If work is not finished, discuss the issue with organizers or staff members at the site. Find a resolution to fit everyone's needs: the group can agree to come back another time or arrange for another community group to finish the job. Do not leave a project without a plan for completion

### Volunteers Arrive Late

In all communications, written and verbal, impress volunteers with the need to be on time. Clarify the time the project will begin and end. Model appropriate behavior by being on time yourself – start registration on time; make all media deadlines; and provide meals at scheduled times. Assign someone to be the timekeeper who ensures that things run on schedule. Before the event, do a "walk-through" and adjust schedule as needed. Be sure to give volunteers accurate and detailed information

about transportation and parking. If providing transportation, give detailed maps and instructions to drivers.

### **Volunteer Expectations**

Tell volunteers from the beginning that they might not have client contact during a one-day service project and explain the reasons. For example, many agencies have strict screening and training processes for regular volunteers to ensure the safety, well-being and confidentiality of those being served. Impress upon volunteers how meaningful their assignment is and how this project is helping to change lives and address critical social issues. Provide information on how volunteers can sign up with the host agency to offer more intensive assistance.

### **Volunteers are Unhappy with Assignments**

Defining volunteer jobs is important. Screening and information collected through pre-registration can assist in making sure volunteers are assigned to a task appropriate for their skill level, abilities and knowledge. To deal with

bonding issues, consider alternative ways of assigning volunteers. First, team leaders can be assigned to teams or be responsible for recruiting their own teams of volunteers. For volunteers participating in ongoing group projects, check in every time the group provides service, and stay in contact with host site personnel to make sure their needs are being met. It is important that any problems are addressed efficiently.